Hit Funk

The ABCs of Funk Guitar

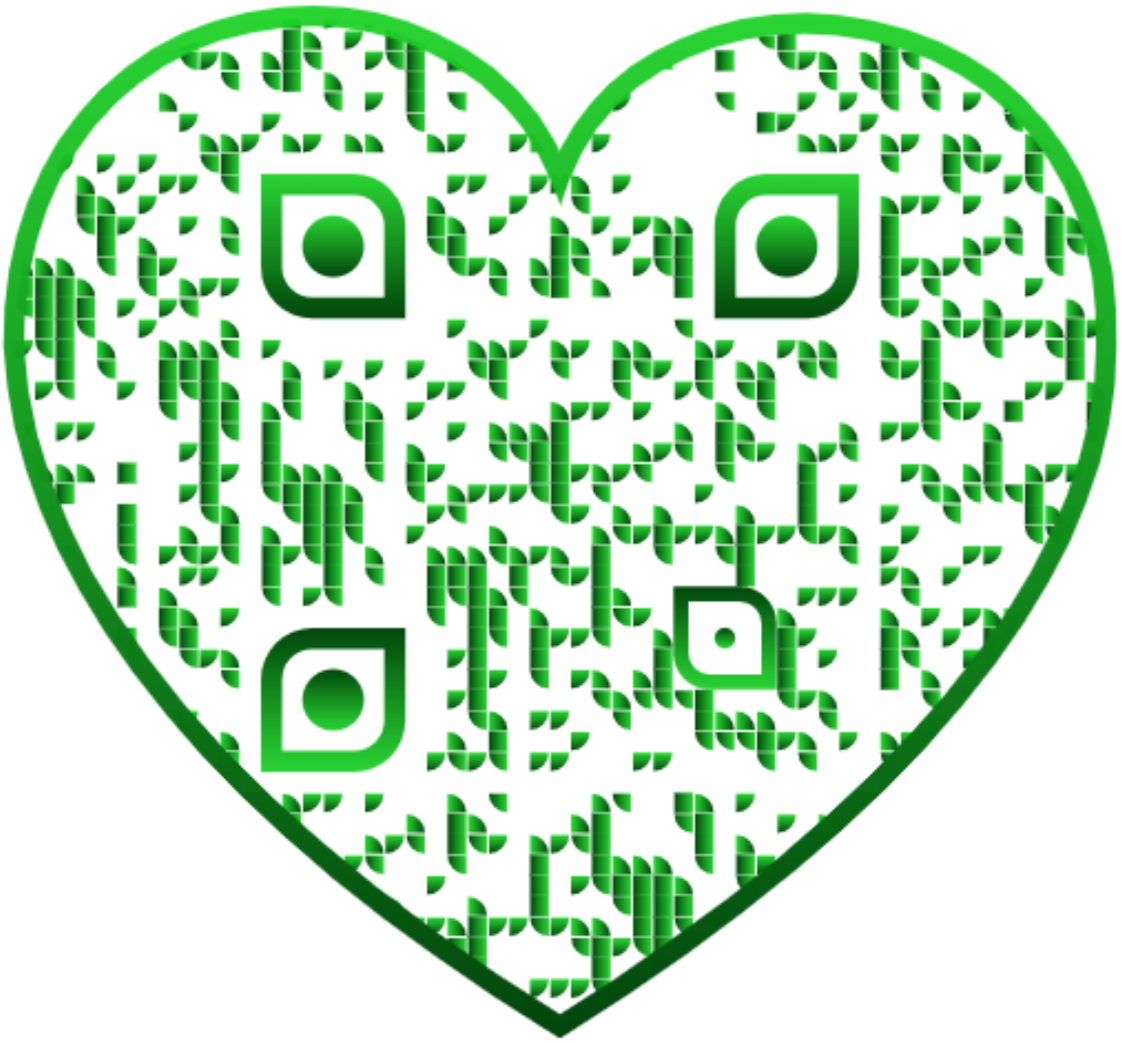
Grooves!

By Ross Bolton

Much like the Colonel's famous "11 herbs and spices," the recipe for funk guitar is shrouded in mystery. Though it takes a lifetime to master funk's subtleties, you can quickly and easily assimilate its fundamentals.

■ **The picking hand.** Always moving with the music, your picking hand is the timekeeper. Because it rarely stops, keep your arm and wrist loose. Never "fix" your wrist, hand, or fingers to the guitar, and avoid dragging your pick across

Illustration: Steve Wacksman



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the strings. Instead, strum with a brisk snap. Try to sound as if you're striking the strings simultaneously.

The fretting hand. You control articulation and determine the duration of each note or chord with your fretting hand. The key is efficiency, so keep fretboard movement to a minimum.

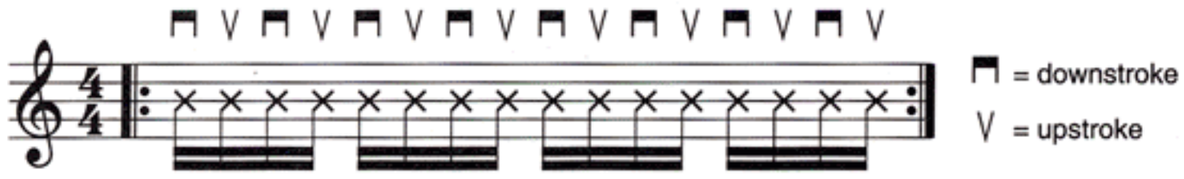
Since most funk music is based on a sixteenth-note subdivision, we'll begin by scratching muted sixteenth-notes (**Ex. 1a**). Each beat consists of alternating downstrokes and upstrokes. Damp the strings with your fretting hand and, using the technique outlined above, start scratching. For now, keep all the attacks even—no accents.

To develop good internal time, practice with a metronome or a drum machine. If you have the latter, program the basic eighth-note pattern in **Ex. 1b**. This beat allows you to play straight or swing sixteenths and won't get in your way.

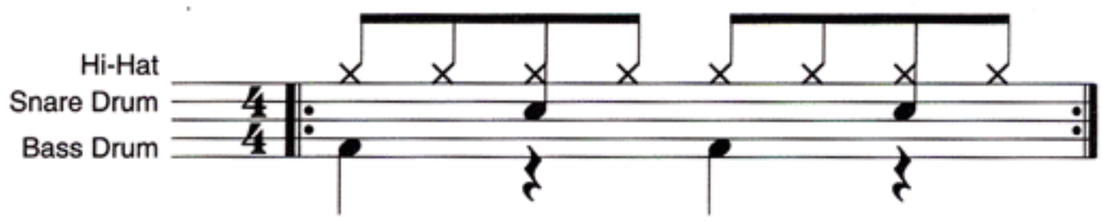
The next step is to isolate and play each of the sixteenth-notes within a beat. Once you've mastered this basic skill, you'll have the technical base to play any sixteenth-note syncopation.

As you work through **Ex. 2**, start at about 70 bpm and gradually increase your speed. For these exam-

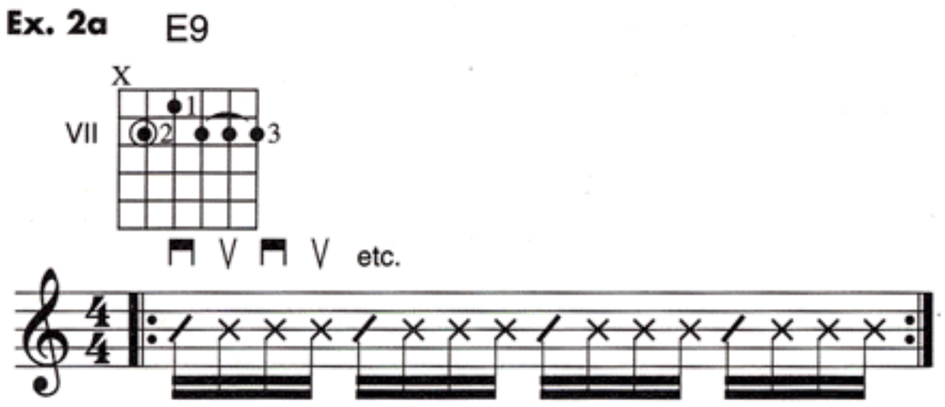
Ex. 1a



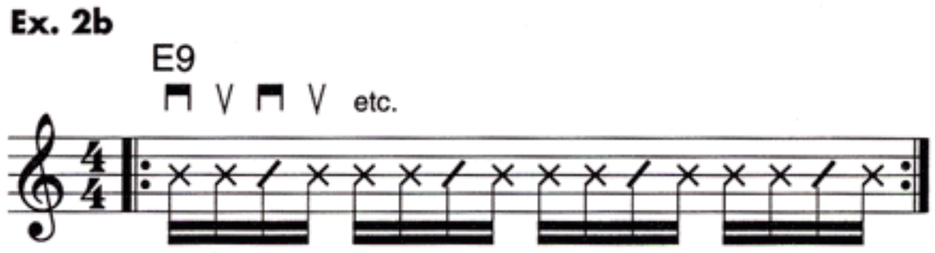
Ex. 1b



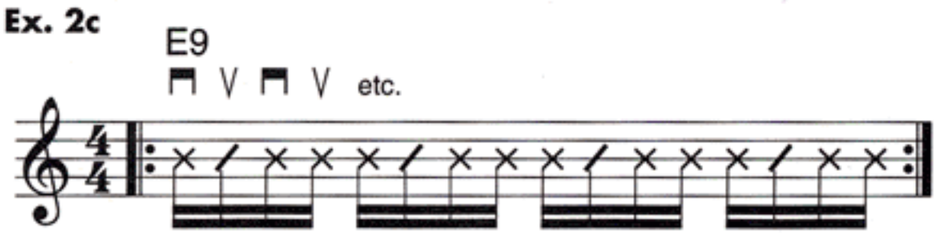
Ex. 2a



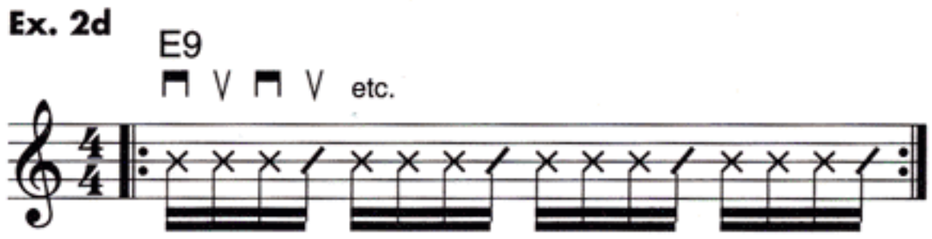
Ex. 2b



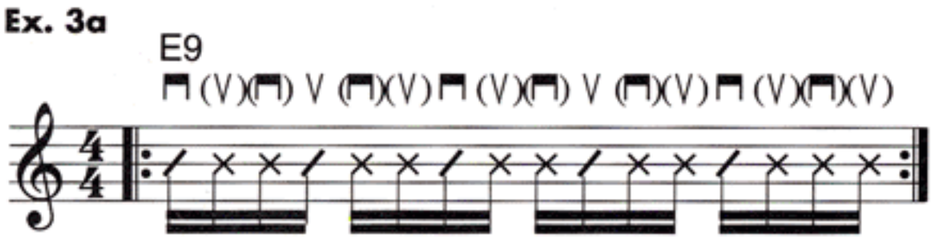
Ex. 2c



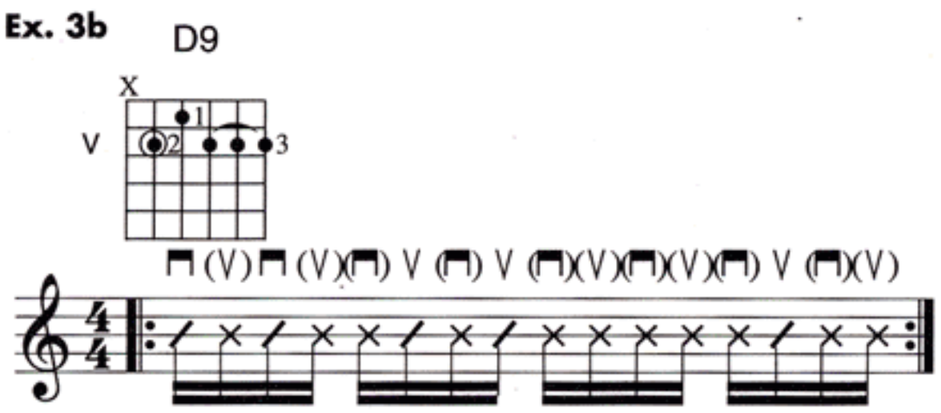
Ex. 2d



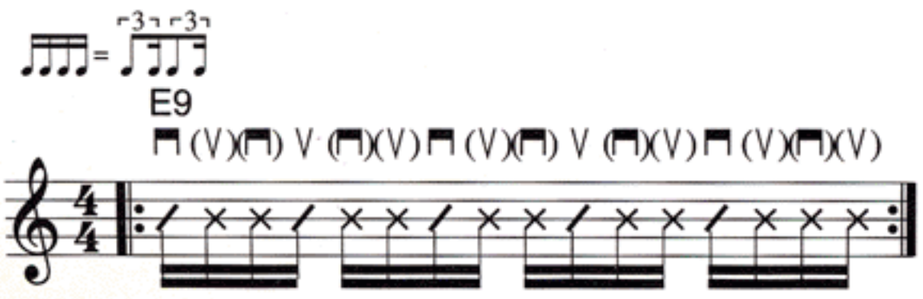
Ex. 3a



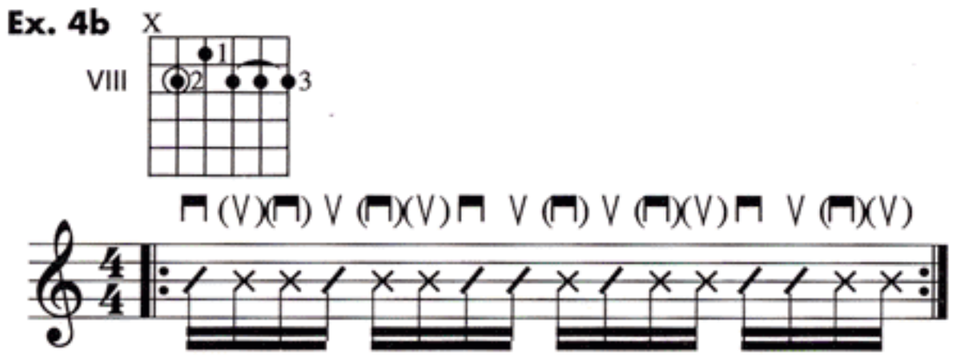
Ex. 3b



Ex. 4a



Ex. 4b



ples, we'll use the mother of all funk chords—*E9*. The first and third sixteenth-notes (the downbeat and upbeat, respectively) are downstrokes. Start by scratching the muted sixteenths and then, once you're locked into the meter, add the chord on the appropriate beat.

The second and fourth sixteenths are upstrokes. At first, they can be a little tricky to play. Keep your picking-hand motion even. Exaggerating the attacks can throw off your time.

Now let's forge these sixteenth-note patterns into cool rhythm grooves, starting with **Ex. 3a**. Move down two frets to *D9* for **Ex. 3b**.

When you first practice these grooves, continually scratch the strings, subdividing each beat into four sixteenth-notes. This lets you hear and feel the chord accents against the meter. Once you're comfortable with this, try "floating" your picking hand above the strings during the muted beats. Sometimes a heavily scratched part sounds great (à la Al McKay of Earth, Wind & Fire), but many times it's not appropriate (Prince). Develop both techniques.

A joy to the ears, a swing-sixteenth or hip hop feel is tough to describe. Create this feel by delaying the second and fourth sixteenth-notes within each beat. Essentially, keep your downstrokes the same, but slightly delay your upstrokes. The amount of swing varies from groove to groove.

Scratch **Ex. 4a** with a swing feel. Once you nail it, float your picking hand on the muted sixteenths. Move up one fret to *F9* for **Ex. 4b**. This one sounds great with a swing feel. Again, first scratch and then float the muted sixteenths.

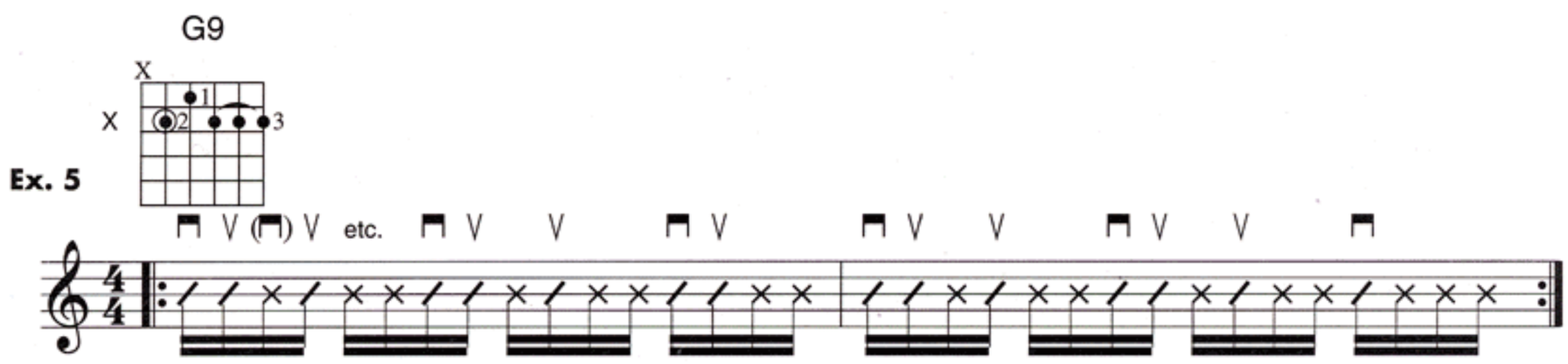
Examples 5 and **6** are two more short rhythmic phrases for your groove approval. For now, stay with the dominant 9th voicing. Play these—and all following examples—first straight and then with a swing feel.

Ex. 7 is a little tricky. Since there's no attack on the downbeat at the beginning of the bar, you can easily lose beat one. As a tribute to Hendrix—a hellaciously funky rhythm player—we'll use *E7♯9*.

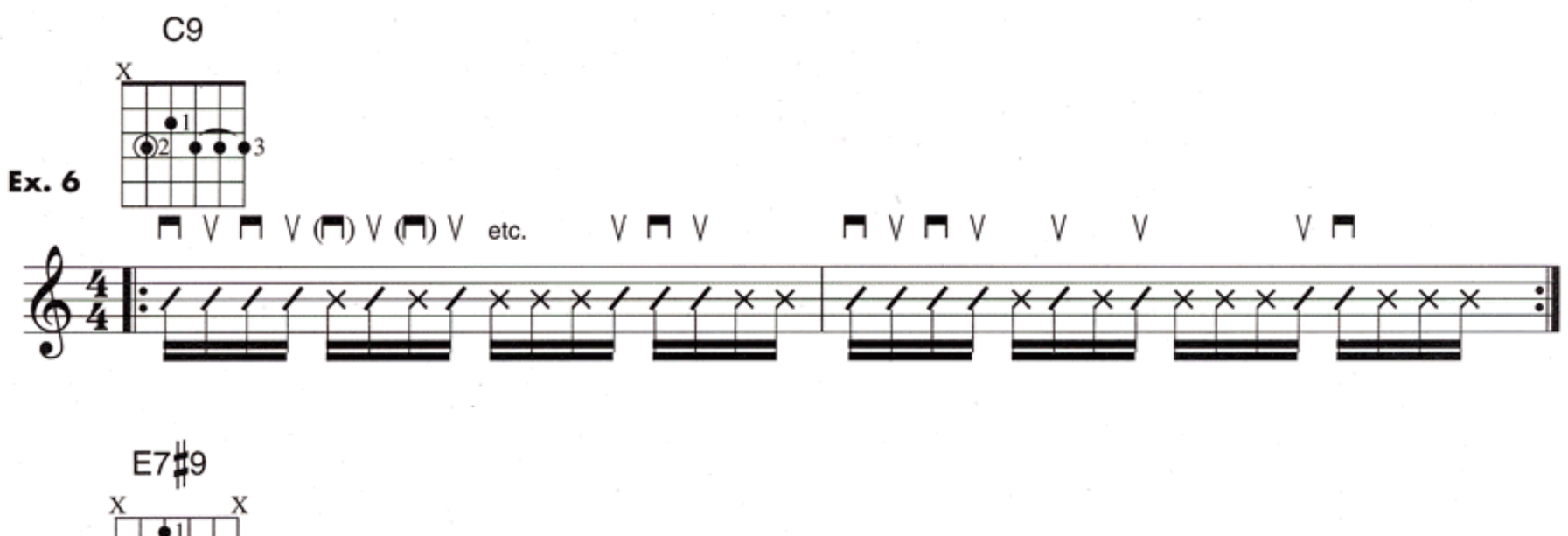
A half-step slide adds motion to a static guitar part (**Ex. 8**). Float your picking hand on the second sixteenth-note while your fretting hand slides up one fret. It's essential to slide in time and maintain enough pressure on the strings to sustain the chord through the slide.

Practice this technique on **Ex. 9**, and then drop down to *C9* and use the slide in **Ex. 10**. Revisit grooves we've explored earlier in this lesson and enhance them with

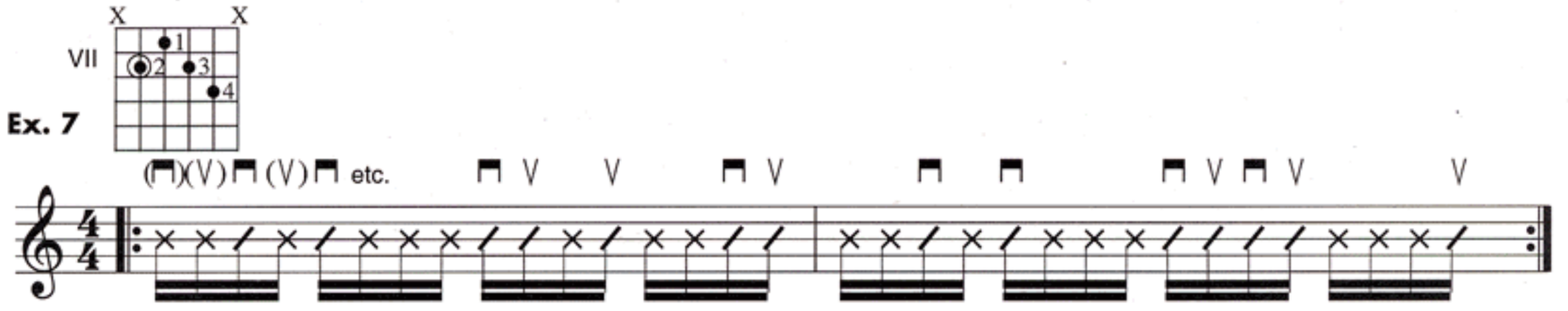
Ex. 5



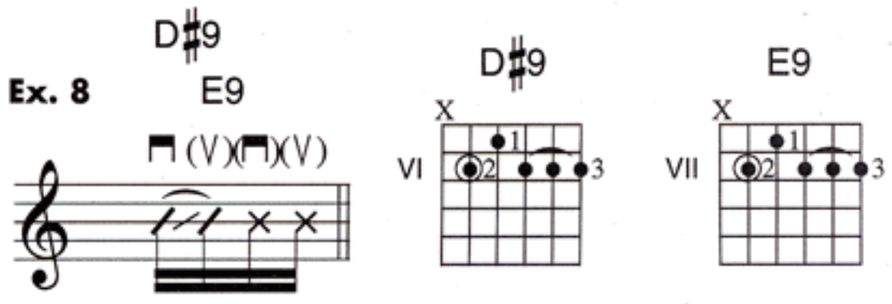
Ex. 6



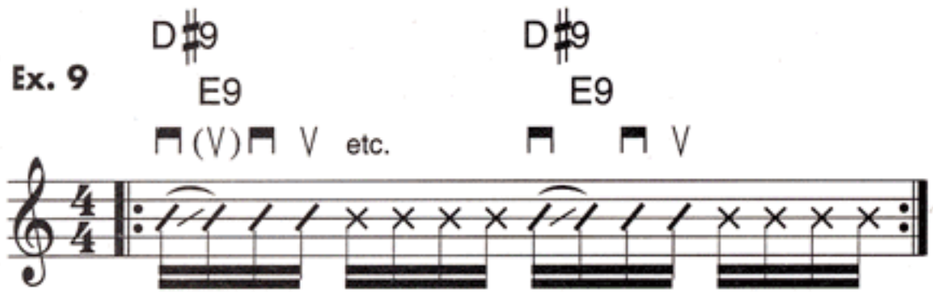
Ex. 7



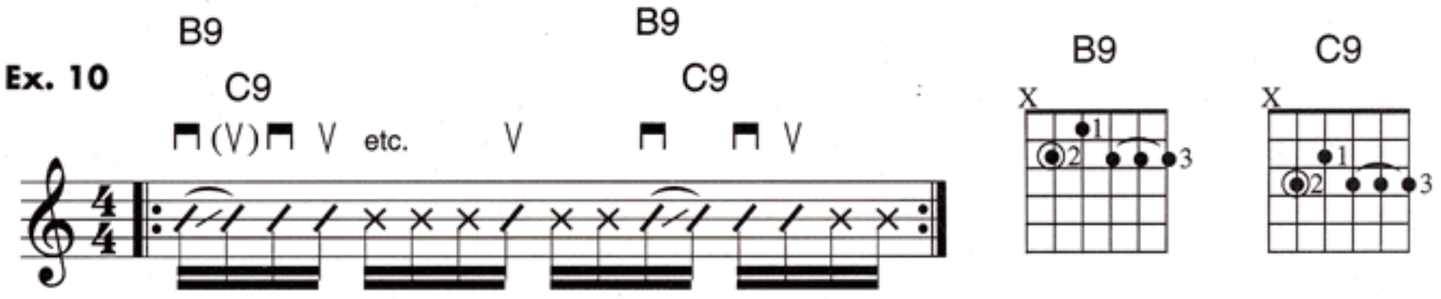
Ex. 8



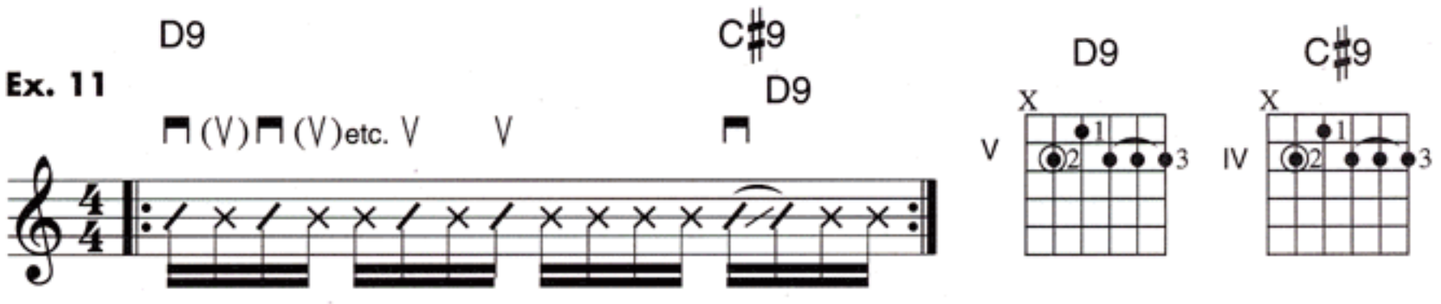
Ex. 9



Ex. 10



Ex. 11



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a half-step slide, as in **Examples 11**, **12**, and **13**.

Chords. To get a grip on funk, you need to memorize the dominant chord voicings in **Ex. 14**. Most are located on the higher strings. Voiced too low, a chord can get lost or sound muddy when heard with other instruments.

Ex. 15 is inspired by an early Kool & The Gang tune. Put a little swing on it. To make **Ex. 16** sound like an early Prince groove, play with a touch of swing and don't scratch the muted sixteenths.

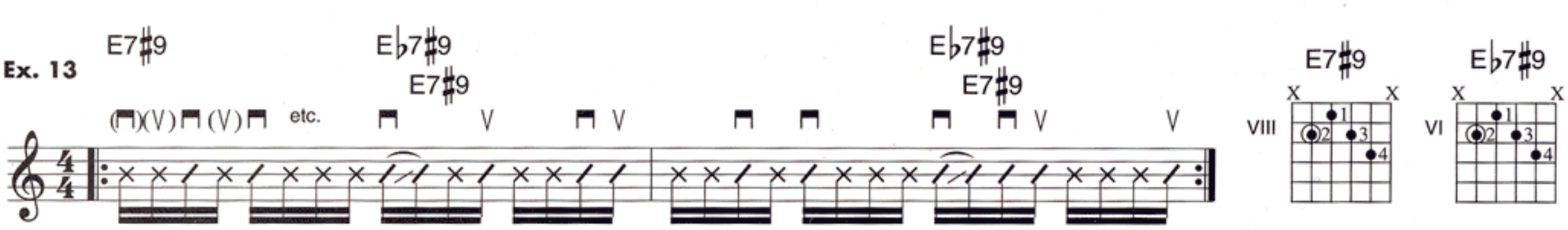
Get big ears. It's one thing to analyze funk technique; it's another to cop funk's feel. The key is to listen to those who define the style—the innovators, not the imitators. Funk music began in the '60s with James Brown. If you want to play funk, you simply *must* have his *20 All-Time Greatest Hits* or the *Star Time* box set. After James, pick up greatest-hits collections from Sly & The Family Stone, Parliament, Funkadelic, and Earth, Wind & Fire. *In Yo' Face*—a cool five-CD collection on Rhino—provides a great introduction to artists from funk's golden age.

Funk is party music, so make it fun, keep it loose, and always go with the groove.

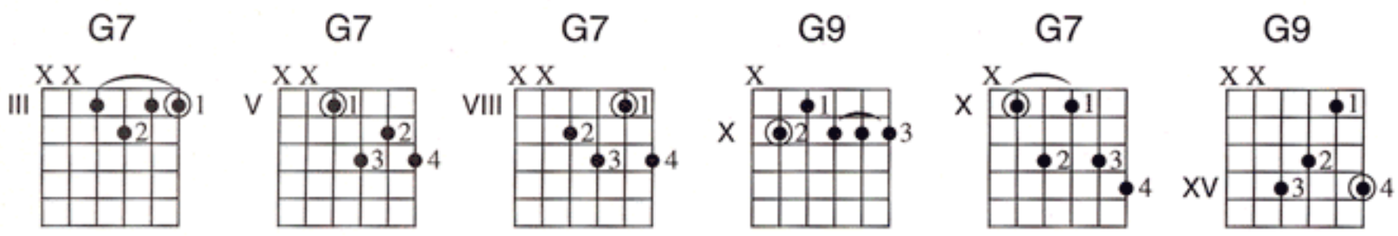
Ross Bolton teaches funk guitar at G.I.T. He's recorded with the Beach Boys and performed with members of Tower Of Power and Earth, Wind & Fire. His video Funk Rhythm Guitar *is available from Video Progressions, Box 3463, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266; (310) 376-2671.*

Ex. 12

Ex. 13



Ex. 14



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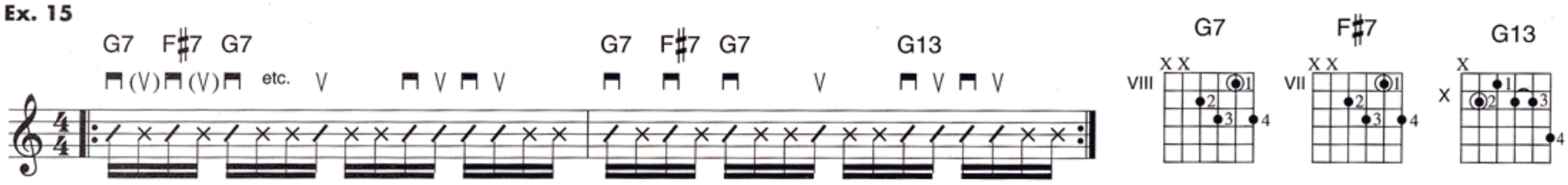
Ex. 15



Ex. 16